

CHAPTER XIV

Albert Jay Nock

IN NEW YORK, in the fall of 1936, I happened in one night at the Players Club. As I sat at a table with a couple of men, I noticed a dignified, elderly gentleman playing pool. He was very deliberate—painfully so to his opponent—in the selection of his shots, and quite accurate, too. At the end of the game he came over to our table, on request, and I was introduced to Albert Jay Nock. I had read much of his writings, in his books and in the *Old Freeman* and was thoroughly in tune with many of his ideas, which he seemed to sense; we hit it off from the start, and until his death in 1945 we exchanged views and became as friendly as one could be with this reserved though companionable gentleman.

“I have led a singularly uneventful life, largely solitary, have had little to do with the great . . . and no part whatever in their affairs, or for that matter, in any other affairs.”

So wrote Albert Jay Nock in the preface to his last book, *Memoirs of a Superfluous Man*. He wasn't being modest; he meant it. He did not believe anybody would be interested in reading about a man who had assiduously avoided making money or acquiring fame or taking part in the current of events. All he had ever tried to do was to get the

most out of life in ways that he had found most pleasurable. He was an intellectual hedonist, entirely superfluous to the utilitarian environment in which he lived.

Therefore, he repeatedly refused to do the autobiography that William Harlowe Briggs, editor for Harper and Brothers, had been asking for. He had always shunned publicity—never gave a word to *Who's Who*—and saw no reason at this late date to let a morbidly curious public in on his personal affairs. But Briggs won him over to the project by making judicious reference to an essay on autobiography which Nock had published some time before. The only good purpose which an autobiography could serve, wrote Nock, was to record whatever philosophy the author had acquired on his way through life; if in so doing he found it necessary to relate experiences that had brought him to that line of thought, then it is permissible to throw them in; but to parade before the public what is none of their business is vulgar.

Thus came his brilliant "autobiography of ideas." Every time Nock brought him another chapter, Briggs told me, he would say, "I don't know why you would want to publish this, Bill, for I am sure you will lose your shirt on it." The editor knew better. His obvious motive was to get another book—probably the last, for Nock had already reached the three-score-and-ten mark—by perhaps the finest stylist in twentieth century American literature. The book had a better sale than any of his previous books, even though every line in it was critical of the prevailing "climate of thought."

Nock was an individualist, and he got that way not as the result of study but by force of temperament. As he would

put it, the "furniture" of his mind was so arranged because no other arrangement would quite fit his mind. A man thinks what he is, Nock would say, and no amount of education can make him think otherwise; the only function that education can perform is to give him the tools with which to bring out of him what "he already knows." He would have no truck with the doctrine of environmentalism, which he described as a false god set up by self-appointed and self-centered priests.

He took to *laissez faire* economics, not because of its utilitarianism, but because of his abhorrence of political interventionism; even if the free market did not yield the greatest results, it was preferable to a regulated one. He was an anti-Statist because he revolted at the vulgarism of politics and its devotees; in his classic, *Our Enemy the State*, he likens the State to a "professional criminal class." He scorned reform movements because they all involve the use of political power which, on examination, will be found at the bottom of the condition the reformers would correct. He was for letting people alone because only under a condition of freedom can they improve themselves, if there is any capacity for improvement in them.

He was completely out of step with the times. But he was not crotchety nor quarrelsome with things as they were; he rather accepted them as inevitable. While keeping as far as possible from the parade, he went his own way through life. In a crowd, if he happened to be in one, he was distinguishable only by his infinite capacity for listening. He was too considerate to refute any statement, even a palpably false one, and too self-respecting to get into controversy. "Never

complain, never explain, never argue," he often said, "and you will get more fun out of life."

It was when you got him alone that you got a true taste of Nock, and I had the good fortune to meet him quite frequently during the last ten years of his life. Over a meal—I was usually ready for coffee before he finished his soup—he would regale you with bits of history that threw light on a headline, or quote from the classics a passage currently applicable, or take all the glory out of a "name" character with a pithy statement of fact. He was a library of knowledge and a fount of wisdom, and if you were a kindred spirit you could have your pick of both.

His gift of parable was extraordinary. Those who are acquainted with his writings know how he could short-circuit a lot of logic-shopping by the use of an apt story; he spoke as he wrote. One night during the war, a group of super-patriots were expounding on the theory of the innate bestiality of the Germans and stressing the need of digging our national heel into the entire race. Nock, as usual, said nothing. Finally, someone called for his opinion. He quietly allowed that he knew nothing of the subject under discussion, but begged leave to tell of an experience he had had in a small German town some years before the war. While waiting for the stationmaster to serve him, said Nock, he picked up an historical booklet about the town. It was written in *alt hoch Deutsch*, which is to modern German about what Chaucer is to modern English. In due time the stationmaster turned to Nock and asked him if he were an American. Assured that this was so, the man expressed astonishment, for he had never heard of an American scholar, let

alone one who could negotiate ancient German. As a result of this chance incident, Nock was lionized during the few days he remained in the town. "In France or England," concluded Nock, "I never heard of scholarship being so highly regarded." There was no more talk of exterminating the German people.

His stock of illustrative matter was garnered not only from a lifetime of travel and interesting associations, but also from the literature of the three "dead" languages, to say nothing of the French, German and English. One evening he cast an appreciative eye on a passing female. I remarked that it was about time he stopped looking. His reply was to quote a passage from the Psalms of David, in Hebrew, referring to the lure of feminine pulchritude.

What did he talk about? Everything, from good eating to literature, from politics to manners in the tenth century. One subject was, by tacit consent, tabu; that was anything biographical. He would not hesitate to bring in, when necessary to the point he was making, some detail of his life, even an intimacy; but it never occurred to either of us to follow that thread. He was a man about whose personal life you simply did not inquire. It was only after I was appointed administrator of his estate that I learned of the existence of two full-grown and well-educated sons. By the way, his "estate" consisted of some clothes, books and uncollected royalties in the amount of \$1300. Yet, he had traveled extensively and lived reasonably well.

Nock's brand of individualism came out in full panoply when he discussed education, a subject in which he was keenly interested. He insisted that no fault could be found with modern education if the underlying principle of democ-

racy were accepted as an axiom. That principle holds that not only are we all equal under the law, but that we are also endowed with equal capacities. It follows, then, that we are all equally and perhaps indefinitely perfectible, given equal educational advantages. Public education for all is the way to the perfect society.

But, in point of fact, we find considerable differences in the intellectual capacities of individuals, and these differences make the application of the democratic principle difficult. Yet we are dedicated to the principle and cannot abandon or even modify it. The best we can do under the circumstances is to fit the standard of education to the lowest common denominator, and to keep on lowering it as more and more are invited or forced into the school system. It would be undemocratic to set the standard above the reach of the most unfortunate moron. Everybody can be trained to do something, and so education under the democratic principle had to become utilitarian. Which fits in with the laudable idea that every child is born to enjoy a larger share of the material things of life than did his father. Therefore, the goal of democratic education must be to fit the future citizenry for some trade or profession, and courses in carpentry or domestic science have become more important in the curriculum than courses in Latin or logic.

But, where does that leave the mind that is capable of learning? In the Grand Tradition, said Nock, education was geared to that mind only; the standard was set for it, and if one could not reach the heights, one was not educable and that was the end of it. Though he did not belong to the select circle, he could be a very useful citizen and lead a very happy life. In a material way, indeed, the non-

educable were likely to have the advantage over the others; Spinoza, a highly educated man, earned his modest living as a lens grinder.

The object of education in the Grand Tradition was not to train technicians but to pick out of the ruck those who were endowed with questing minds. It was quite undemocratic, to be sure, in that it took cognizance of an intellectual elite. For that minority breed the democratic system has no place, and anyone suffering from intellectual curiosity is compelled to get his education in any way that he can find outside that system. This theory of the educable elite is of the essence of Nock's individualism.

An evening with Nock on education was a stimulating experience, especially since the conversation was embellished with anecdotes. But if you had any idea that Nock intended to "do anything about it" you were soon set straight. "Things are as they are and will be as they will be," and events will take their course regardless of reformers. The educable will get their education, despite democracy, simply because they are educable. Any attempt to change the democratic educational system is both presumptuous and hopeless.

"Why, then," I asked him as he was setting out on a lecture tour, "do you lecture? Why do you write? Why do you criticize when you have no alternative plan to offer?" His reply: "A fellow does what he has to do."

If he had a favorite topic, it was his theory of political organization. He held that there is a basic difference between government and the State, and it is a mistake to use the words interchangeably. The one is an institution arising

from the needs of society; its function is to protect the individual in the enjoyment of the rights that inhere in him by virtue of his existence; its only business is the administration of justice. On the other hand, the State is an anti-social organization, originating in conquest and concerned only with the confiscation of property. The State began with the practice of nomadic tribes swooping down on some agricultural community, confiscating the movable wealth and, after slaying the less productive inhabitants, carrying off to slavery a number of others. Slavery is the first institution of the State. Later on, the raiding tribesmen, sometimes by invitation, would settle down among the producers as "protectors" and administrators, collecting tribute for their pains. Sometimes a merger between invaders and their subjects would take place, even by marriage, and a nation was born; but the instruments of confiscation were continued, and those who inherited them became the State.

This is, in a way, an economic theory of political institutions. There are two ways of making a living, Nock explained. One is the *economic means*, the other is the *political means*. The first consists of the application of labor to raw materials so as to bring into existence things people want, the second is the confiscation of the rightful property of others. The State is that group of people who having got hold of the machinery of compulsion, legally or otherwise, use it to better their circumstances; that is, by use of the *political means*. Nock would hasten to explain that the State consists not only of politicians, but also of those who make use of the politicians to further their own ends; that would include those we call pressure groups, lobby-

lists and all those who wangle special privileges from the politicians. All the injustices that plague "advanced" societies, he maintained, are traceable to the workings of the State organizations that attach themselves to these societies.

This differentiation between State and government was set down formally in his *Our Enemy the State*, which originated in a series of lectures to a class in advanced history he gave at Columbia University. (Incidentally, he refused the offer of a professorship at this institution because he did not think he could "punch a clock.") In private conversation he would enrich the theory with historical anecdotes and with references to living persons which could hardly be put in print. The book handles the subject of the development of the American State rather gingerly; in conversation he could be more blunt.

To sum up, Nock was an unique individual, both in his ideas and in his comportment. In the best sense of the word, he was civilized; knowledgeable but never pedantic, reserved but companionable, cosmopolitan in his tastes and, above all, a gentleman to whom it never occurred to inflict hurt on any man. He avoided the mass-mind, not only because he thought it most uninteresting, but because he thought nothing could be done to improve it. If there was to be any improvement in society it would have to come by way of self-improvement of the individuals who compose it. So, Nock put in a lifetime bettering Nock, and since he had chosen writing as a profession he concentrated on polishing his style to the point where it became the envy of his contemporaries.

ALBERT JAY NOCK

Henry L. Mencken once said to him: "Nobody gives a damn *what* you write; it's *how* you write that interests everybody." That is about the highest compliment one craftsman could pay another. But, it was not exactly true. What Nock said was as interesting as the way he said it.